

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHORS OF
IF IT'S NOT FOREVER...

NIKITA
SINGH



DURJOY
DATTA

Someone
Like
You



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NIKITA SINGH was born in Patna and grew up in Indore, Madhya Pradesh. After pursuing a degree in Pharmacy she decided to try her hand at writing. She is the author of the best-selling books *Love@Facebook* and *Accidentally in Love* and co-author (with Durjoy Datta) of *If It's Not Forever...It's Not Love*.

DURJOY DATTA was born and brought up in Delhi. He has an engineering degree from Delhi College of Engineering and a management degree from MDI, Gurgaon. He is the author of several best-selling books including *Of Course I Love You!*, *You Were My Crush!*, *She Broke Up, I Didn't* and *If It's Not Forever...It's Not Love* (with Nikita Singh). Durjoy was recognized as a young achiever by the Teacher's Achievement Awards and in 2011 he was chosen as one of two young achievers in the field of Media and Communications by Whistling Woods International.

*For Mini, the best sister any girl can ever have. You will
always be missed.*

(Neha Singh—4 July 1992 to 23 April 2011)



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me feel like I had never felt before, so now I think I have. He was my first experience with love, and though it ended on a bad note, I don't hold it very much against him. After we broke up, I spent days locked up in my room, crying and watching sad movies and cursing everyone. Eventually, I did badly in the board exams. My parents had been expecting a lot from me and I hated letting them down.

My father was a government employee for the first fifteen years of his career. My grandfather, a lawyer with the local government, had died a premature death—a heart attack—when he was forty-three. Dad was only eighteen then and the eldest in a family of three sisters and two brothers. By government rules, he was offered a clerical job at the office and he took it up. He spent the next fifteen years working three jobs—the clerical job, tuitions, and as a part-time accountant for small businesses—and bringing up his siblings.

Just before I was born, he joined a local university as a professor, having done the rest of his studies through correspondence and evening college. Things have been better since and he wants a better future for both Simran, my older sister, and me. Simran is already on her way. She was always interested in English literature and went off to Delhi to study. We have no doubts that she will be doing her Master's from Oxford on a full scholarship next year.

Meanwhile, my future was in shambles when Piyush left me. The tenth standard board results were more disappointing for my father than they were for me, not that he ever let it show. I remember him coming into room, holding my hand and saying, 'I know this is not your best but I have full faith in you, Niharika. You're meant for bigger things.'

'I have let you down, Dad. I don't know what to do. I will never be as good as Simran Di. I am sorry. I am...'

'Come here,' he said and hugged me.

I don't know how much he meant it, but I was moved to tears. When the other kids were beaten up and disparaged for their less than



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nondescript college in some corner of the country for four long years, and I can't do that? Is it too much to ask for?'

I can tell that she is getting impatient. But this isn't about me. This is about her.

'Please.'

'What?' she shouts at me.

I say nothing. I don't know what to say. She is and has always been very persuasive. Her persuasiveness was one of the major reasons why she was the champion debater in school who had never tasted defeat. Very early in life, I was pushed into debates by her but I was never as good as her. I felt like a star kid, trying desperately to live up to the predecessor's fame and talent. I was always the ugly duckling—the lesser known sister—while she was the dazzling swan, the star.

'What is it, Niharika? Why don't you want to come?'

'Honestly, if I come to stay with you ... for a week, I would only ruin your reputation,' I say. 'I still remember my first debate at the Presidency Convent. Everyone thought I was your sister and expected me to be like you. But you know what happened ...'

I had choked. It was a crowd of over five hundred students from twenty different schools and we—sisters, and supposedly the best debaters our town had seen—represented our school. I froze on stage in the third minute of my passionate yet restrained speech and our team finished seventeenth. She won the best individual debater and best interjector awards and I came back home with a crippling inferiority complex that would last a lifetime.

'Come again? That was eight years ago and you were a little kid. And don't let me count the number of times you have stood on your own now.'

'Simran, please. I know you're very famous there. And I'm not someone people should associate you with.' I say, and add with a pause, 'I am ugly. I don't know how to dress. Or walk. Or talk. I don't know the



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CHAPTER TWO

Gosh, I Need a Boyfriend

Delhi is a big city and it can leave you befuddled if you don't know anyone here. I remember the first few days Simran had spent here. She had been excited to come to Delhi because she always thought, and we did too, that she was a little too big for a small town like ours. Plus, Delhi was always a few hours away and the lure of a city was too hard to resist for someone like Simran.

But things changed when she landed in Delhi. Her phone calls used to last for hours and she used to feel so homesick that Mom had almost booked a taxi to Delhi to stay with her for a few days. My father and I knew better. Within the next few days, she had made herself at home in Delhi and started to fall in love with the city and its culture. Or the lack of it. Now, she loves the place and says she will settle down here if possible.

My first impression of the city isn't that bad either. Big, wide roads and tall buildings greet me, even though the summer heat and the leering men on the streets throw me off balance slightly. I have never been stared at, so it feels a little strange.



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‘I heard you’re leaving in just three days? You should have stayed here at least for a week. We had so many plans for you,’ he says and smiles at me disarmingly.

‘Really?’

‘Obviously. We have been waiting to see you. Simran talks about you all time and quite frankly, I feel like I already know you.’

‘Oh shut up, Viraat,’ Simran says. ‘You don’t have to try so hard to impress my sister. I love you anyway.’

We share a laugh, after which we all fall silent. Everyone looks around at everyone else, but no one says anything. I am not to blame for the silence, though. I just got to know that my sister has a boyfriend. I have never heard any mention of him, so it is justified for me to be shocked. I don’t even know for how long they have been dating.

‘Viraat—’ I start meekly, but am cut off by a louder voice.

‘We should probably leave now. We are already getting late,’ Prerna says.

‘Shit, yeah,’ Simran says, ‘we should get going.’ She looks at Viraat.

‘Right,’ he says. ‘It was nice to see you, Niharika. See you tonight.’

‘Tonight?’ I ask.

‘Sure,’ Simran says and ushers me away.

‘Where are we going tonight?’ I ask her.

‘You’ll see.’



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She pushes some magazines—ranging from *Cosmopolitan*, *Verve*, *Marie Claire* and *Bazaar* to some whose names I cannot even pronounce—towards me. She points out hairstyles, colour combinations, and options for shoes, and I stare at them all, mouth agape. The girls in the magazines are pretty and their clothes are even prettier. The kind of clothes Simran wears. Even today, she is in a yellow summer dress that ends at her knees and she looks beautiful in it. But these are also the kind of clothes I do *not* wear. I want to, but I'm afraid I would end up looking stupid in them.

'But Simran, I can't wear all this,' I say and dig into the chocolate pastry we had ordered. If there is one thing that I have come to love in Delhi, it's the food. It's amazing and no matter where you go, something awfully delicious will find its way to your mouth.

'Yes, you can wear all this,' Simran insists. 'See, most of the clothes here are for models and really skinny people. You are skinny and you can look prettier than these models here. For now, we will buy you something toned down and once you're used to it, we will buy the more outrageous and outlandish clothes. But yes, we do have to get you a dress.'

'I am not sure.'

'You're never sure. Screw the pastry, let's go to a salon now,' she says and pays the bill. The charmed waiter makes sure the card is swiped and the slip is signed swiftly. We leave Barista and my heart aches for the unfinished pastry—a little piece of heaven—that I had been forced to leave behind.

As she drags me out from the coffee shop and onto the escalator, I ask, 'Why a salon?'

'When you look into the mirror in a beautiful dress, more often than not, you're looking at your face and not the dress. Yes, the dress matters, but the face matters more. We need to get you tidied up. And trust me—cleaning eighteen years of dirt takes time.'



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go on for another seven lives shopping, but I am sure we are out of cash by now. We have already spent all our savings from our pocket money, and Simran hasn't got a single article of anything for herself. I have the biggest smile on my face and she notices it. It's not just about how she made me feel about myself, it is also about how she made me feel about *us*. I finally feel like I can stand next to her and not wallow in self-pity. I owe it all to her and she knows that. I don't think we have hugged or laughed or smiled as much as we did today.

Truly, sisters are your best friends ever. And also—shopping, of course.

Just as we cross a shop that has t-shirts with little slogans on them, I stop Simran and ask her if I can get another t-shirt. She disapproves of the colour but still lets me buy it.

The t-shirt says in big, white, bold letters, '*I LOVE ME*'.



It has been a long day, but I have no complaints. I look at the mirror and I am amazed at myself. I am getting more and more self-obsessed and now I think I can spend quite a few days with myself. I feel like the girls I had always hated because they were good-looking and desirable and spent time grooming themselves instead of doing complex math problems.

I am still sifting through all the clothes that we bought today and I keep on trying them repeatedly. I love my new clothes! They love me back and it's an exhilarating feeling. I never realized before that new clothes could make one feel so good.

'We are late. So damn late,' Simran shouts but I turn a deaf ear to her. She tells me that Viraat is already waiting outside the hostel and that we need to hurry up, though I don't hear Simran's phone ring even once. It surprises me how patient Viraat is.

We get into our dresses and I have to say I am a little uncomfortable in



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‘You mind?’ he asks.

‘Yes. It’s my sister, you pervert. You’re flirting with her right in front of me.’

‘What? I thought I was flirting with *you*,’ he says, making a funny face.

‘Such a smooth talker, you are,’ Simran smiles and shakes her head.

He comes forward and pecks her on the lips. ‘Now if you’ll excuse me, I need a refill and the waiters here are busy ignoring me. You want anything?’

‘You want me drunk?’ Simran asks.

‘Well, let’s just say—I like you drunk,’ Viraat says with a wink.

As Viraat moves off, I see Simran’s eyes following him. She’s looking at him with an expression of pure adoration on her face. I say what I’m thinking. ‘When I met him in the morning, for a moment, I had thought you were one of those girls who change in front of guys. But you’re just the same. You swear a lot and you really give him a hard time.’

‘I don’t need to change. He likes me the way I am. And that’s the best part about him. You like him?’

‘I like him? I love him! He is so nice. It’s almost unreal.’

‘I know,’ she says, looking at my face intently. ‘I wanted you to like him. I was nervous that you wouldn’t. I really wanted you to meet him.’

A lot has changed since the morning. I see no reason why Simran should be nervous. What is there *not* to like? The guy is perfect. If I make a list with bullet points for qualities I’d look for in a guy, every point would be a tick for him. Plus, just as a bonus, Simran told me this morning that he is very passionate and is an amazing kisser.

Simran looks away from and in the direction of Viraat; she is lost again. Her smile is dazzling. Wow. Sometimes I forget how beautiful she is. It is times like these when the fact hits me straight in the face and leaves me reeling with the impact.

‘You really love him, don’t you?’ I ask stupidly. If you could see the



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CHAPTER FOUR

All It Takes Is Three Short Minutes

I can't have that. It's sad, I know. But that's how it's going to be. There's just no other way to it. As I pack my bags, which are bursting at the seams because of all the new clothes I have bought, my thoughts are still on Simran and Viraat, and more importantly—the loving bond that they share. It's like I have a crush on their relationship and I badly want it for myself.

'Are you done?' Simran asks.

'Almost,' I say and stuff the last of my clothes into the bag and zip it. 'Done.'

'Alright. We should leave for the station now. Else you'll—'

'Simran,' I interrupt her. I just *have* to ask her this. 'Do you think I will find ever someone like Viraat?'

'Why Viraat? You will find someone even better,' she says. *Yeah, right.*

'Hmm. I wish I could stay a little longer,' I say softly.

'So that you could find a Viraat for yourself?' she smirks playfully.

'Whatever,' I say and pick up my bag. Simran really bugs me



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CHAPTER FIVE

Yes, No and Maybe ...

‘Really? I wonder how you look,’ Navroz says over the phone.

‘I look ... I don’t know. I’m still the same,’ I reply, checking my reflection in the mirror and thinking what a blatant lie it was.

‘But I’m sure you must look better without the glasses.’

‘Hmm. Simran says losing the specs was a good idea. She says I have nice eyes.’

‘I won’t know about it. I never noticed!’ Navroz laughs.

‘I think you’re gay. For two years, you saw me every day, for hours on end. And you didn’t notice my eyes?’

Navroz really amazes me sometimes. I know him so well, that I can describe each and every feature of his face in perfect detail and he can’t even tell how my eyes look? I don’t blame him though, as he never really looked at me like a guy should. We first met when we accidentally sat next to each other in the first physics class at Bansal’s and we ended up sharing an auto back to our paying-guest accommodations.

He liked physics and I liked organic chemistry; both of us hated maths with a vengeance but managed to score all right. The healthy



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should be angry at him. But it wasn't really his fault. I finally add, 'It wasn't your fault.'

'I know, but I scared the shit out of you. I am sorry for that.'

'That you did,' I say and smile shyly, embarrassed by what had happened.

'Let me get you something and we will call it even?' he says.

Is he flirting with me or is he just being nice? I nod my head in affirmation. As he picks up the menu card, I look at him properly for the first time. He's good-looking in a *very-nice-guy* sort of a way.

Everything is in place and he looks exactly like he behaves—very polite and measured. His hair is cut short—yet is incredibly shiny and makes me want to run my fingers through it—and is neatly combed, shirt smartly tucked into his neither-too-formal-nor-too-casual trousers, and a pair of nice brown shoes. Pretty neat, I think to myself. Just the kind of guy you would feel safe with.

'Coffee?' he asks, as the waiter comes to take our order.

'Oh, no. I don't drink coffee,' I say.

'Tea?'

'Tea neither.'

'Really?' he asks.

'Really. All my caffeine is only from Coke.'

'Coke, then, for her and a cappuccino for me, with garlic bread,' he says to the waiter.

When the waiter leaves, we turn to look at each other. Suddenly, we have nothing to talk about. He looks at me with a glint in his eye and I start regretting my decision to let him apologize. I should have shouted and stormed off. Not knowing what to do, I take out my cell phone and start pressing random buttons on it, to look busy.

'Is everything okay?' he asks. I look up to see him looking at me with concern in his eyes.

'Other than the fact that you almost killed me moments ago, I think I



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CHAPTER SIX

Way Too Perfect

Over the last three days, I have often found myself staring at inane things and wondering if Akshat is the one. What if he is just like Viraat, only better-looking? After all, the unfortunate way that we met—when he almost killed me, then cared enough to come to apologize and we got talking—seemed right out of a silly, romantic movie with a happy ending.

After that first encounter, we had met again the next day. Akshat had called two hours after I had left Barista to ask me out. I had agreed, blushing all the while. When he called, I was still in a daze. It's not every day that guys shower me with attention.

But then, it was quite weird in the beginning. We both did not know whether it was a date, or if we were both just being friendly. All we knew was that we both wanted to spend time with each other. Our first encounter had sparked enough interest in us to make us want to get to know each other better. So, not knowing where to go, we decided to meet at the same mall where our little accident almost happened, and take it from there. Once there, we stared at each other awkwardly after



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‘Umm ... okay,’ I reply. The look in his eyes is so sincere that I just have to accept his offer. At least this time.

When we get to the car, he holds the door open for me. No one has ever done that for me! I am flattered. The last guy I dated—Piyush Mehra—didn’t even want to be seen with me. I see him make his way around the car and get in. He’s perfect. How did I ever get so lucky?

‘So? Excited about the new college?’ he asks.

‘Yes. A little nervous, but excited.’

‘Would you mind if I come to visit you some time?’

‘Why would you do that?’ I ask, and look at him stupidly. I know it’s a question I shouldn’t have asked, but I want an honest answer to it. I may have got myself a new hairstyle and borrowed some of Simran’s personality, but a guy like Akshat can get anyone. Then, why me?

‘I think you’re very pretty. But that’s not it, there are many pretty girls out there, but you’re smart and you’re funny too. That’s what I really like about you. If I were to guess which college you should go to, it would either be NIFT because you carry yourself so well in those clothes or IIT, for you are smart as hell,’ he says, and while he does he holds my hands tight and looks into my eyes.

‘Typhoid. Right before the tests. I barely even managed to get to the exam hall,’ I say, as I struggle to find words. I choke on my words and tremble. ‘Just before the exams.’

‘I hope you know it’s IIT’s loss, not yours,’ he says and flashes his perfectly white teeth at me.

I like to believe what he says. I’d prepared very hard for the IIT exams. And after two years of dedicated effort and sleepless nights, two days before the exam, typhoid got me. I was so heavily medicated during the exams that I could barely keep my eyes open.

The All India Entrance Examination for Engineering was considerably better, and I got into ICE, Nagpur. After the results came out, everyone promptly forgot about the ailment and my incompetence became the



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better? *What could be worse?*

It took just ten minutes to get from the first question to the second and in the process, all my silly, stupid, rosy dreams were crushed. From the best possible date a girl like me could ever get, it became a complete disaster. If only I had known. If only I had known, I wouldn't have been so torn right now, cursing myself and thinking about what could have been. No matter how angry and dejected I am, I still find it hard to push his gorgeous face out of my head, and I feel terribly guilty about it.

After my last date with Akshat, I had spent the night tossing and turning in my bed. I had spent countless hours thinking about everything that had happened and playing it back repeatedly in my head. Not being able to keep the excitement to myself any longer, I had called Simran, first thing the next morning.

'Hello?'

'Hi Simran,' I said, grinning from ear to ear.

'Hey. What's up? Tell me if it's important. Else I've to get to class. This stupid college schedule, extra classes on Saturday! It's almost like they are paying us to study and not the other way around,' she muttered, more to herself.

'Oh. You're busy. I'll call you later then?'

'No, no. What is it? I think I'll bunk the lecture. I can't seem to find the other shoe ...'

'Umm ... something happened.'

'Hmm?' She still sounded distracted.

'Leave it. I will tell you later.'

'Would you just tell already?'

'I ... I met someone,' I said. 'I met a guy. He's nice and we went on a date. And it was perfect. He is gorgeous. We went to—'

'Wait, wait, wait! Hold on. Who is he? Where did you meet him? When did this happen?' she shot a volley of questions at me. I could tell that I finally had her undivided attention. And I could hear the



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‘No, it’s not. My sister doesn’t want me to see you any more and I respect that. And you knew that I was Simran’s sister and you didn’t feel like mentioning it to me? You knew I wouldn’t talk to you, didn’t you?’

‘No, Niharika. Yes, I do admit that I should have told you. But the first day when I met you, I had no idea who you were. It was only the second time we met that you told me about your sister. I didn’t want things to get weird between us. I really like you and I didn’t want to screw this up,’ he said, every word more sincere than the other.

‘You know what? This is exactly what my sister warned me against. You and your pathetic lies. Why me, Akshat? Go and try it with some other girl whose sister you might not have pissed off before.’

‘I didn’t—’

‘Shut up, Akshat. This is the end of the conversation. And this is the last time we are talking. Don’t try to contact me ever again.’

‘*WOULD YOU JUST LISTEN TO ME ONCE?*’ he suddenly shouted. That shut me up immediately. I was taken aback. That was it. I hung up and vowed to never take his calls again. Almost instantly, his frantic calls started. And the messages, which I stopped reading after the fifth one. I have to admit that it was a little tough for me to do. Even when I broke the news to him that I knew about his past alliance with Simran, he wasn’t thrown off his feet. He, instead, was extremely calm and wanted us to talk about it. How could he be so calm? And perfect?

I flop on the bed and dig my head in the pillow, silently hoping to *not* see his perfect smiling face in front of me when I open my eyes again. I hope I will not see his outstretched hand waiting for my hand—I hope I will forget the two most beautiful days I spent with a stranger, who ended up being a devil of a person.

I doze off a with huge *why* on my mind. I was happy with people not knowing about my existence.





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‘No way! Are those *my* eyes? Are they really as big as footballs?’

‘Yes,’ he says and smiles shyly.

‘This is amazing,’ I say and look at it more closely.

He starts to tell me that he has been doing this for over ten years now. He tells me that a lot of people have asked him to pick it up as a career, but he has never wanted to do it for money. He shows me a few more sketches he has made, and each one is more impressive than the last.

‘So, where are you from?’ I ask as I look at the caricature again and wonder if my hair is really that bad.

‘Barwaha. It’s a small place in Madhya Pradesh. You could not have heard about it.’

‘Yes, I haven’t. Was it nice there?’ I ask.

He looks at my face for a second, as if judging if I’m making fun of him. Satisfied that I’m not, he replies, ‘Yes, it was nice. It’s a small town, but it’s beautiful. We have the Narmada river like one mile away from my home. It was fun ...’ I can clearly hear the nostalgia in his tone.

‘Nice. I’m sure it’s lovely there. I am from Jaipur. I’ve lived there all my life. I spent the last two years in Kota though.’

‘I thought you were from Delhi. Or Mumbai or Bangalore,’ he says and adjusts his spectacles that drop below his nose-bridge.

‘Why would you say that?’ I ask.

‘You look like you are from there. The clothes, the way you talk ... you know? The style ... I don’t know,’ he says, and it looks like he regrets saying it.

We start talking about our home towns and he tells me more about himself. He tells me his father has a small factory that makes parts for electronic calculators and his interest in electronics started from there. He looks like someone who comes from a background without a lot of money. His complexion is darkish, his looks are average, his clothes are regular and his hairstyle shouts that he belongs to a small town. And that is what I find most appealing about him. He is just a kid, from a small



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laughing seniors. I know it's me who is going to get into real trouble once these seniors make Tanmay leave, but I still feel sorrier for Tanmay. The poor kid, he looks lost.

'Didn't you get it?' One of the two standing seniors comes close and stares down angrily at him.

'I ... I won't go,' Tanmay says.

'Do you even know who you're talking to?' the senior who was sitting down stands up and glowers down at Tanmay.

Tanmay shakes his head and looks down.

'*GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!*' the senior shouts and I see people from the adjoining tables look at us.

I steal a glance at Tanmay, who is looking down and away from these guys. He still doesn't budge. But I can see that he is shivering quite badly by now. I feel bad for him. I can't stay silent any more.

'Excuse me—' I say but I am cut off.

'*CHETAN MEHTA* is the name. *I AM THE COLLEGE-FUCKING-PRESIDENT,*' the senior thunders. He now turns to me and continues, 'And I don't want this guy in the canteen. You have a problem with that?'

He looks at me with his bloodshot eyes and I have to admit, I am a little scared. Before I can get hold of my senses and say something, I see a hand creep up the college-fucking-president's back and pat it.

'You're creating trouble again, aren't you? How many times have I told you not to get drunk in the morning?' the guy says.

Strangely enough, the voice seems familiar. It comes back in a flash—it's the one from the college mess yesterday. The satin-smooth voice with the rough edges to it. I look up and I can finally see the face of the guy who had objectified girls—and probably me—just yesterday in the college mess. I notice that he has deep black eyes, partially hidden by a mop of wild curly hair. I know I should not be, but I am instantly attracted to him.



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teeth, his perfect mannerisms and how perfect he made me feel. I have tried telling myself that it was just one day, one date and I shouldn't feel the pain—almost physical in its manifestation—that I am going through. I miss him. I know it's irrational, but I do. I tell myself it's more because of the way we broke up than because I had to lose him.

'Just two?' Tanmay asks, shocked at my admission that I have dated just two guys. I nod. 'But at least you have kissed someone! I wonder what that is like.'

'It depends on who you kiss, really. So now, not only do we have to find you a girl, we have to make sure you get to kiss her too,' I say. 'Not that I have too much experience in that area.'

'Or we can remain losers forever,' he says and smiles.

There is something very warm and fuzzy about Tanmay that makes me want to hug him and never leave him. Unlike Navroz—who is, and will always be, my best friend—he isn't the smart-ass guy who will joke around and make you feel at home. He is different and has a child-like air around him.

We pick a spot on the stairs of the physics laboratory to rest our aching legs. It's surrounded by buildings and is substantially cooler than the rest of the campus. He takes out his red and silver laptop and puts it on his lap.

'Let's watch a movie?' he asks me.

'Sure! Neat laptop, by the way,' I say.

'I know. My dad got it for me when I got into ICE. He had promised me he would get me one when I start college,' he says with a glint in his eye, and starts talking fondly about the laptop, like a child does about a new toy.

'It's nice,' I say after he is done explaining the high-end configuration and the confusing buttons on the laptop. 'It's red, after all. It looks like a panel fell out of a spaceship.'

'Thank you,' he says and offers me one earpiece of the earphone.



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CHAPTER TEN

Love at First Sight

It's been half an hour since I have been back in my room and my roommate still hasn't turned up. I am getting a little anxious now. I tried sleeping a little while back, but it didn't really work and I am still wide awake. It's almost seven when I hear a commotion out in the corridor. It sounds almost like a landslide and I go out of my room to check.

Just outside my room is a pile of at least ten suitcases and I see two men carrying four more behind them. The skinny men drop the suitcases where the others are lying and then stack them next to each other—exactly fifteen suitcases. One of them leaves while the other stands at attention, looking down the hallway like someone important is coming. Is this my roommate? Is she some kind of a princess or something?

From the far end of the hall, I can hear the sound of heels clicking against the mosaic floor, taking quick and determined steps towards where I am standing. The girl turns the corner and I see her brownish-black hair bounce around her face, a pair of sunglasses perched firmly on her forehead, a white T-shirt clinging to her slender body tucked into skinny navy blue trousers held up by a thin brown belt. The heels making



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‘He does. It’s at least a crush,’ I say.

‘It’s not like that,’ she says. ‘Whatever. So, can we, like, go and see the auditions?’

‘I think so,’ I say and we decide to drop the classes and go to the football field straight away. It is at the opposite end of the college campus and by the time we reach there, I am out of breath and the excitement to see Tanmay play has totally drained out. We climb over the railing, which Pia does with surprising ease, and walk towards the football field.

‘That’s why you should go to the gym,’ she mocks me when she sees me out of breath. She has been waking up at six in the morning every single day and comes back at eight, sweating and looking sexy, while I sleep my head off.

‘I can’t get up that early and after college, I am just tired,’ I defend myself.

‘It’s your loss, really. Many good-looking guys come to the gym. You would be surprised that our college has them,’ she says and winks at me.

‘Good-looking guys, eh? I think it’s time we call Vishal!’

‘Oh! No! I was saying—for you, not me. And there aren’t a lot of them there anyway. It’s basically empty. But that guy from McDonald’s? The rough, hot guy? He does come there every morning, with his girlfriend.’

‘Girlfriend?’ I ask. I hadn’t realized that he had a girlfriend.

‘There is always a girl with him who keeps falling all over him, so I assumed that they were together. I don’t know for sure. But why are *you* so interested in that, anyway?’ she winks at me and smiles naughtily.

‘I am not. I was just asking generally,’ I say.

We turn to the football field—which, too, is nicely maintained—and find that we are not the only people there who had no intentions to audition for the team. The stand looks pretty full. There are a lot of people loitering around, bunking classes to be here. Most of them are girls. Tanmay had told me that our college’s football team was one of the



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already beaten down juniors. I see him wink at them as he walks close. He is the only guy in the field in a plain black tee and jeans, and sticks out like a sore thumb.

Tanmay's eyes light up when he sees him. The guy hugs him and the other two juniors. I see Tanmay say something to him, before making his way towards us. When he gets to us, he swiftly removes his shoes and starts to pull off one of his socks.

'What are you doing?' I ask, baffled.

'I can't play with these shoes on,' he murmurs, not making eye contact.

'What do you mean? Are you changing shoes?' Pia asks. We cannot see a spare pair of shoes anywhere in sight.

Tanmay says something very softly, that we both do not understand. 'No ... without shoes ...'

'Tanmay, what is going on?' I ask, now concerned.

He folds both his socks and stuffs them into his shoes, before pushing them under my seat. He looks up at me, and meets my eye, carefully avoiding Pia's eye, before saying softly, 'I have played football barefooted all my life. No shoes used to last more than a few weeks and we did not have enough money to get a new pair every month. So I have always played without my shoes on. Now, it seems like I cannot aim with these on.' He points to the brand-new pair of shoes he had bought out of his savings, now lying useless under my bench.

I nod silently and whisper, 'Good luck.'

'Go get them,' Pia says, and I see Tanmay blush slightly before turning around and running to the field.

Pia and I cross our fingers. The match starts, and the seniors miss a goal. They are already a little disturbed by the new guy's presence and one of them shoots the ball outside nervously, seeing the guy in front of him.

The dark-eyed guy puts his hand on Tanmay's shoulder and tells him



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day. I had asked Tanmay but he didn't have any idea either.

I check the watch. It's 5:45 a.m. and in another ten minutes, Pia's alarm will ring. I struggle to keep my eyes open and not fall asleep. Exactly ten minutes later, her alarm chimes. She immediately sits up straight as a ramrod and I do the same.

'You're up so early? What happened?' she asks as she stretches both her arms in the air. She is in an old, long T-shirt—of her boyfriend—and I can see her gym-toned legs.

'I just couldn't sleep well,' I lie.

'So you want to come today?'

'Naah, I don't. I'll maybe just ... watch a movie, or ... something. And I have never been to a gym in my life,' I say.

'Oh c'mon! I will tell you what to do,' she says and starts to tug at my hands to pull me up off my bed.

'Alright, alright, I'm coming,' I make a show of disinterest and yawn dramatically.

'Now get up,' Pia kisses me on my cheek and looks for her toothbrush.

I act highly uninterested, but when she looks the other way, I clean myself up, brush my teeth, comb my hair and put on a little bit of lip gloss, just in case. When we are ready to go, Pia looks at me strangely and says, 'You look ... fresh.'

I smile innocently and hope she doesn't notice the lip gloss.

The gym is in the sports complex, another ten-minute walk away from our hostel. As soon as we leave the hostel, she asks me to jog and I go '*what!*' After much prodding, I do so and realize that it's not that bad. The weather is nice and the wide roads of our campus are empty.

'Okay, so I will take two more rounds and join you in the gym in five?' Pia asks when we get to the gym.

'Huh?' I say, with both my hands on my knees, panting.

'Unless you want to run with me too?' she smirks, as she knows my answer.



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‘Tanmay told me, that’s how,’ he says matter-of-factly. His lips curve into a small smile and I look directly at him. Like every time, he is still unshaved and his hair is all over the place. His eyes look directly at me and I try to look away from his piercing gaze. I find it impossible to do so; his eyes demand attention.

‘Fine,’ I say and start walking away from him.

‘So, now that we know each other’s name, we will not talk to each other?’ he says, and throws up his hands in the air.

I don’t answer and keep walking away from him. After a few steps, I can’t feel him following me and I wonder if he’s going back. A part of me wants him around so bad, I want to go back and chase him. The other part hates him and what I just saw. When I can’t handle the curiosity any more, I turn around. He is standing there, his arms crossed on his muscular chest, his head tilted cockily to one side and a lopsided half-grin on his face. I can’t help but smile grudgingly, before turning away from him. He runs up to me and it surprises me how quickly he reaches my side.

‘Why did you talk to Tanmay about me?’ I ask, as he walks with me at a safe distance.

‘It was hard not to.’

‘Why was it hard not to?’

‘That’s something you’re not supposed to ask,’ he says and there is a silence. I realize that there is a slight nip in the air though it’s not too cold.

‘Tea?’ he asks, and points in the direction that leads outside the college.

I am taken aback. I know I should say *no*, because I hate him so much, but I still find myself whispering a *yes*. I have no idea why. Everything about Karthik and my reaction to him is way above my level of understanding. Since when have I started drinking tea?

He points to his bike that is parked just at the college gate. It’s



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feel a lot closer to him. It feels like a barrier between us is now broken, and I know him. I don't know why my heart beats faster and the world narrows down to him. I am still confused about my feelings for him. I am still unsure whether I like him or not. Maybe I do, and I am just fighting that feeling God knows why. Maybe.

Way too soon, we reach the college. He stops the bike just outside my hostel, and I get down carefully, holding his shoulder for support.

'It was great seeing you today,' he says. 'You look even better from up close.'

'Thank you,' I smile and wave him a goodbye.

When I turn back, I see a familiar face standing with a suitcase and a bag slung across his shoulder.

'Hi!' he shouts out to me.

As I stand there frozen, I hear the bike's engine explode again and Karthik drives off.



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‘Can’t we just talk before I do?’ he says.

‘Five minutes. I am late for class.’

He nods and we walk towards my class, though at a way slower pace. He looks at me and tells me that I look good. Somehow, I choose to believe him. And I feel guilty when I feel all the anger against him melt away. I feel like I am betraying Simran. I think I was never angry at him, just uncomfortable and feeling really weird.

‘How have you been?’ he asks.

‘Fine. How are you? Things have been good?’

‘Well, frankly—no. Things haven’t been going well since you left. Or rather *because* you left ... Why, Niharika? What we had was so beautiful ... Why did you end it like this? I have been thinking about that day every day.’

‘Akshat ...’ I begin, not knowing exactly what it is that I am going to say.

‘Did it mean so little to you—what we had? Did *I* mean so little to you?’ he asks with such hurt in his eyes that I cringe. Until now, I hadn’t realized it meant so much to him. After all, we had known each other for only a very short time. And we had met just twice, though they were two of the best days I have ever spent. After meeting him, I remember having felt a strange happiness in my heart.

‘I didn’t have any other option. You lied to me,’ I say.

‘I didn’t lie ...’

‘You hid the truth knowingly. It means the same thing.’

‘I didn’t know what to say,’ he says.

‘The truth. What else?’

‘It’s not as easy as you think. There is a lot more to it than meets the eye. Whatever happened was way back and things have changed since then. I have changed.’

‘Tell me,’ I say, bracing myself to face what’s coming next. This has been too much of a mystery. I just have to know now—*why did they*



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He's caught off-guard. For a moment, he stares at me. I wink at him. We laugh. It's true that over the last few days—ever since he made it to the football team—he has been getting substantial attention from the fairer sex. Football is like an obsession in this college and at first, I was shocked to see it. The seniors in the football team—a bunch of good-looking, arrogant seniors—are very desirable in our college.

Now they have another boy in their team. But Tanmay is not just one of them. In fact, he is nothing like them. He is way different. In a team full of huge, bulky, cocky players, who spend half their time on the football field and the rest getting high on weed and alcohol, Tanmay definitely stands out. He is not one of those rich, spoiled brats, who have lots of their dad's money to spend. Even though he is wearing the same uniform and shoes as the rest of them, Tanmay stands out. He, instead of using his weight and attitude on the field, concentrates on adroitness and speed. A typical small-town boy that he is, he does not believe in playing dirty. He is just plain talented; he does not need cheap tricks to win.

After getting into the team, he was instructed that playing without shoes on is not allowed as per the sport's rules. So Tanmay has started practising with shoes on, and he is getting better by the second. He just needs to get used to them, and the day isn't far when he would be a better player than every other guy on the team. And, surprisingly, the rest of the seniors on the team do not hold a grudge against Tanmay. In fact—they all love him! He makes the team stronger, and that is what matters the most. I feel proud of him.

'So, football stud,' I say as he scribbles on his assignment sheet in his beautiful, girlish handwriting.

'Let me work,' he says.

'What's your problem? Why are you so irritated today?'

'I am not irritated, I am just a little concerned about Pia.'

'Concerned about Pia? Why? What happened to her?' I ask. I didn't know that there was anything wrong with Pia.



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victory? It was the best day of my life,' he says with nostalgia and passion in his voice.

'I have seen you play and I still think it's so odd. You really don't look the football kinds. You're too polite for this game.'

'Every player is a different player,' he smiles at me.

'Hey! What are you guys doing?' Pia asks, coming back from her long phone call. She looks a little disturbed but I don't ask her why. Long-distance relationships have their own pitfalls. Only yesterday, after getting off from a call to Vishal, she almost cried because she was missing him and Delhi so much. Thank God I had my Mom's home-baked chocolate cake to distract her.

'Pia, I have been calling you for so long. You need to complete this assignment, quick,' Tanmay says. 'We need to submit it by four in the evening.'

'Which page are you on?' she asks.

'Sixteen.'

'Oh shit!'

'Never mind; Niharika has just started. You can copy it with her,' Tanmay says and hands over the assignment to Pia whose hands are full—a plate of fries in one hand and a Coke in another.

Pia gives me a questioning look and I acknowledge it. She knows that Tanmay has a huge crush on her. But there is nothing we can do about it. We just sit silently and keep scribbling, not even bothering to understand what we are copying down.

By the time it's four, only Tanmay has finished. He gets his assignment photocopied and hands it over to us to copy it down.

'I will go and submit mine. Call me when you guys finish it. I will talk to the teacher and get you a time extension,' he says, opening his bag and stuffing his assignment in. He takes out his football shoes and ties the laces.

Pia leans over and whispers in my ear, 'That's one thing I really love



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A little later, I see Pia wave her hand at me from her bed.

‘What?’

‘Someone’s outside!’ she says.

I pluck out the earphones and try to listen. I am pretty sure that someone is shouting our names. It doesn’t take me long to realize that it’s Tanmay, a different Tanmay, a *loud* Tanmay! We both run to the window and look down.

‘*HEY! PRETTY LADIES!*’ he shouts and waves his hands at us. He is swaying from side to side.

‘What the hell!’ Pia shouts back at him.

‘PIA! I’M NOT DRUNK! Or maybe I *am*. *Shhhhhhhh* ...’ he shouts and turns to look to his right. Our eyes follow his and we see Karthik sitting on his bike, smiling back at him, from a few feet away.

‘You need to go. Right *now*,’ I shout. The warden could come out any time and report him, and that’s the last thing I want happening to Tanmay. I wonder if it is Karthik who made Tanmay drink.

‘*I ain’t going nowhere!*’ he shouts in a fake twang and starts laughing maniacally. He can barely stand straight now. His spectacles are all wrong and tilted to one side, his hair is ruffled and windblown, his clothes are dirty and he looks like shit.

‘GO! Go back before someone complains about you. NOW!’ Pia shouts, clearly concerned.

‘But I LOVE YOU!’ he says out loud and flashes a smile at her.

I do find it a little funny, but I also know what will happen if someone catches him doing this. I ask him to go to his hostel, ‘We can talk about that tomorrow! You need to go now.’

Pia, meanwhile, has started to blush.

‘I LOVE YOU! I LOVE YOU! I LOVE YOU! YOU’RE SO BEAUTIFUL! YOU’RE MY SUNSHINE!’ he starts singing totally out of tune, but totally cute. He keeps tripping over himself as he sings the self-written, self-composed song.



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the widest and silliest grin possible and says, 'Guess what!'

'What?' I ask and hope it's not about chemistry.

'Look at who's going to assist us,' she says and points to someone standing right next to the professor.

It's Karthik. In his black T-shirt, blue jeans and sneakers, he looks just like us. His hair is all ruffled and it looks like he has just gotten out of bed. He is surrounded by a lot of girls from our class and uninterestedly answers the questions the girls ask him between foolish giggles. Even the few guys around him giggle. He has that effect on people.

'Whatever,' I say and accompany Pia to our table.

She starts picking out chemicals and bases and whatnot with alarming accuracy and determination. Like they are all just different shades of lipstick or something.

'You're so good at this!' I exclaim.

'We all have our strong points,' she says and smiles at me.

I stand in a corner and look at Pia while she goes about the experiment excitedly. I don't even pretend to hide my boredom. I wonder what Tanmay is up to. Maybe suffering from a terrible hangover. A little later, Karthik—who I have been unintentionally staring at for quite some time—walks up to us.

'Hi,' he says and Pia smiles at him.

He looks at me and I don't acknowledge his look or his smile.

'I am sorry for yesterday. I should never have asked him to drink. He created a problem for you guys, didn't he?' Karthik says. 'But at least he was better than the guy who keeps following you like a creep? What's his name ... Akshat?'

'You asked him to drink? Why would you do that?' I ask angrily. *And Akshat? How does he know about all that?*

'We needed to celebrate, that's all. The team won. That doesn't happen a lot, you know? And he was awesome on the field yesterday. He deserved to drink and celebrate, right?'



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As if I'm not already having a terrible day, when I get to the classroom, I realize that it's a chemistry class. I am bored out of my wits within the first fifteen minutes. I try talking to the guy sitting next to me, but he just freaks me out by talking about the impending examination and how he has revised the syllabus only thrice.

Bored, tired and pissed off, I look out of the window absent-mindedly when I see someone waving at me. It's *him*. Akshat, in all his morning glory and carefully chosen clothes, is standing right outside my classroom and waving at me. I don't even think twice before I come up with an excuse and sneak out of the class.

I walk towards him determinedly and stop right in front of him.

'Is this for real? All I had to do was wave to get your attention, I was following you around for a month and you didn't notice,' he says.

'Sometimes doing what you need to do is all it takes. Like saying the truth,' I say.

'Are we going into that conversation all over again?'

'We—'

'No, don't even answer that. That topic is closed. I have an idea. Let's get out of here? I am sick of this college!' he says.

'Where?'

'Some place nice. Come.'

As I walk behind him to the parking lot, I realize how easily I am back to the day when he held my hand during the movie and kissed me thereafter. Or am I just bored and needy enough to want whatever company I can get? With Tanmay busy with his being-cool stuff, and Pia crying her heart out for that bastard back in Bangalore, perhaps I don't know what to do with myself. I think I should have made more friends in college, but it's not that we haven't tried. Tanmay, Pia and I have taken others along on our walks once in a while—mostly guys—but nothing actually worked out. The guys hit on us, and the girls kept saying Tanmay is so-sweet, so-sweet and I don't think either Pia nor I liked it.



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